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ABSTRACT

In Western culture literacy encompasses a constellation of values and beliefs far beyond what might be attributed to the mechanical ability to read and write. Many people prize literacy as an end in itself, and attribute to it a whole spectrum of values and social privileges disproportionate to its actual functions in society. They forget that writing ability is a human invention created to satisfy specific needs in a society. This ambivalence toward literacy is exemplified in the skepticism with which teachers have met the intrusion of computers into the English curriculum. Cowering at this technological invasion, some seem to fear that computers may signal the end of literacy. The old literacy fostered writing--transcription, a particular technology; the new literacy facilitates composing, leaving the medium of creation open. Computer technology bridges both present and past, and past and future. Understanding the past functions of literacy and how new technologies usurp their place can free teachers from the bondage of time and linearity, helping them to embrace the future. (HOD)

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THE FUNCTIONS OF LITERACY:
THE PAST AS FUTURE/THE FUTURE AS PAST

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Introduction: understanding the functions of literacy

In the public mind the effects of literacy skills are not easily separated from the media which produce them. Consequently, posssession of such skills easily becomes a criterion for assaying intelligence and assigning human worth to individuals. Such considerations have even been introduced implicitly in the recent debate over whether the unborn child is in fact a sentient human being. Literacy historian Harvey Graff has demonstrated that in Western culture literacy encompasses a constellation of values and beliefs far beyond what might be attributed to the mechanical ability to read and write. These values range from

> empathy, innovativeness, achievement, orientation, "cosmopoliteness," information and media awareness, national identification, technological acceptance, rationality, commitment to democracy, to opportunism, linearity of thought and behavior and urban residence! (302)

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In contrast, illiteracy has become associated with all that is problematic with the world: poverty, disease, ignorance, political unrest. Indeed, in some cases, literacy is so closely identified with humanness and civilization that the nonliterate person is sometimes seen as an ignoble savage or moral retrograde. We have lived so long with the myth that education will dispell all traces of human aggression and misery that it comes as a shock to realize how barabric literate civilizations can be.

In the profession, it is possible that we have contributed to such views of literacy by valuing it both too much and too little. By too much I mean that we have prized literacy as an end in itself, attributing to it a whole spectrum of values and social privileges disproportionate to its actual functions in society. By too little I mean we have often forgotten how complex and abstract literacy skills are--forgotten that writing ability is not, in fact, an innate human capability but a human invention created to satisfy specific needs in a society. To use C. S. Lewis's term, our "chronological snobbery" prevents us from recalling that there have been great civilizations, democracies and empires, predating our modern world which did not depend upon universal literacy for stability or quality of life.

In Mesopotamian, Semitic, Greek and early Christian cultures, writing emerged to serve specific functions, evolving out of the needs of the community and not as a particular kind of educational tool or as an end in itself. No teacher in ancient

Greece or Christianized Rome ever told students that writing was "a mode of learning" or a "way of knowing." Rather, writing was seen through strictly utilitarian eyes: a tool for storing information formerly memorized, a means for communicating at long distances, a register for recording divine revelation. Universal literacy has only recently been considered a crucial attribute of adulthood or something essential to the operation and solidarity of a democratic society.

An inflated sense of literacy's functions, a confusion of the effects of literacy skills with the operations which produce them, encourages the teaching of writing and reading as mere stigmata which exclude or exploit individuals in the societies they inhabit. The other extreme is perhaps as problematic; when literacy is taken for granted, when it is conceived as a "natural" ability easily and readily obtained by all those who request it, classroom practices inevitably emphasize the drill and imitation pedagogy which contemporary researchers have discouraged.

This ambivalence toward literacy has been recently exemplified for me in the skepticism with which my colleagues have met the intrusion of computers into the English curriculum. Cowering at this technological invasion, some seem to fear that computers may signal the end of literacy, or, at least end of English study as a necessary endeavor. Their fears, and the public's, I believe, are symptomatic of our misunderstanding of literacy and its functions in society. We have so closely tied

humanness and learnedness with paper and pen, with books, that we are threatened by and defensive about the new media which obviate literacy's former functions. In the rest of this paper, I would like to explore the bridge between the old and the new literacy which computer technology and the pedagogy arising from it may supply.

Literacy as a technology and as a paradigm

As a corrective to the often honorific conception of literacy, Harvey Graff, along with Walter Ong, urges that literacy be demythologized and reconceptualized to reflect its actual nature: both a tec nology and as a paradigm. Writing is a technology, according to Graff, in that it is "a set of techniques for communication and for decoding and reproducing written or printed materials" (307). In other words, the invention of the alphabet and the later development of morphology and syntax typify the evolution of a technology, a means to get something done--in this case, with written words. The technology of literacy thus has a beginning and, presumably, an end; it was a technology born to serve specific social functions and is not something inherently human. The telegraph, radio, camera, telephone, tv, and computer are similar technologies, each arising to serve specific functions in a culture and each supplanting a technology which preceded it.

But because writing, even as a technology, is not merely transcribed speech, but requires a cognitive act peculiar to

itself, literacy has become more than technology; it has become a paradigm, a lens on the world through which it is viewed and understood. Walter Ong amplifies this concept in suggesting that literacy makes possible a more interior, analytical means of cognition than is possible in primarily oral cultures:

> With such external, technological equipment (as clay tablets, skins, paper, styli, brushes, pens, inks), the mind can understand kinds of activities previously impossible. The analytically organized treatise, such as Aristotle's Rhetoric or Physics, can come into existence. There is no way for an oral culture to go through the kind of elaborately analytic thinking processes that constitute such work. (186)

Ong has coined the word "noetic" to describe the range of perceptual and cognitive styles a human being evinces. In primarily oral cultures, for instance, one noetic feature is that the memory is the seat of knowledge: one knows what one can remember--as opposed to, say, locating knowledge and the authority behind it in a printed book. Likewise, the wisdom of a primary oral culture is not stored in libraries, but in persons, the wise man and the high priestess, hence the respect reserved in many Eastern cultures still today for the elderly.

The movement from orality to literacy is thus a movement from one noetic process to another: we come to know things and come to know ourselves in differing ways. Writing, in an even

more dramatic way than speech, has allowed for transcendence of self, for the detachment of knowledge from personal memory into a self-existent text, accessible primarily--if not exclusively--to those who know how to decipher it. It is not surprising that the industrialized and technologized West has come to prize the analytic and highly abstract above the intuitive and concrete.

Implications for teachers

The work of these literacy theorists provides, I believe, the groundwork for a sustained and meaningful critique of the way we have taught and conceived of literacy and hints at how our classrooms might become more conducive to teaching the new literacy which now confronts us. It can be said not just that we teach literacy, but that we inhabit it. In it we move and live and have our being. The threat we perceive from competing technologies entails more than a choice between tools: a lathe instead of a chisel. Rather it is a confrontation between epistemologies. We now live, as Walter Ong has noted, in an epoch of secondary orality, an age in which other media have begun to obviate the usual and past functions of the written and printed word. Our students come to us distracted by competing media and therefore distrust the emphasis and value we place on primary literacy.

Another way of saying this is to say that our students enter a thoroughly logocentric classroom, i.e., a classroom oriented almost exclusively to the fixed, unerasable written word. While

we exult in the joys of literacy--the exquisiteness of a phrase well-turned, the buoyancy of a mind self-consciously examining itself--our students know only the emptiness of it, the baffling marginalia of articulate teachers who know only too well what is wrong with them. What we hold out to our students as power and prestige too often turns out to be a prison-house of language which they cannot enter and from which we cannot escape.

Instead of building bridges to their secondary orality, our xenophobia compels us to build walls. Our very articulateness exacts its price; because we can explain writing gaffes so effortlessly and, further, can prescribe equally facile remedies for them, the loneliness of nonliteracy is masked from us. We are so deeply entrenched in our literate worldview and cut off from what Ong calls "the human lifeworld" that when we hear the sound "tree," we think not of the living Maple or Elm in our front yard but the letters T-R-E-E. But the logocentrism of our classrooms is exemplified most dramatically in our dependence on the textbook.

Writing is, as we have come to say, both process and product. But our logocentrism, born, I think, in our New Critical ways of approaching textuality, gets in the way of our students' reception of literacy skills. Textbooks in some ways encourage learners to reduce the reception of literacy to the mechanical manipulation of certain rules of transcription. The traditional composition textbook is a literal oxymoron, purporting to be the way into an experience when instead they are the way out of it. As Donald Murray has

taught us every moment spent in mere textual analysis is a moment lost to writing.

Computers and literacy

It is here, I think, computer technology surfaces as an antidote to this logocentrism. Traditional literacy freezes time, orders it, apportions it linearly in texts, implicitly positing a view of composing as similarly bound and fixed. The digitized word, and the computer text it creates, are, however, fluid, malleable, interactive, undermining the fixedness of the old literacy and granting us new metaphors for the process of thinking and composing.

The old literacy fostered writing, i.e., transcription, a particular technology; the new literacy facilitates composing, leaving the medium of creation open. Computer technology bridges the present to the past and the past to the future and, in a more sweeping and effective way than such aberrations as continental deconstruction or American reader-response practice, it challenges the New Critical view of textuality and meaning.

The inexorable displacement of writing paper/pen with composing by computers and the evolution of sophisticated speech synthesis and composition will make possible what I impishly want to call the alchemical classroom. Unlike some of my colleagues, I do not disdain or denigrate the metaphor alchemy despite our current empirical shibboleths. It is an image of a mysterious Worldmaker who takes in apprentices to learn by watching and

doing, watching and doing, and not merely by reading and theorizing. The alchemist knows that her apprentices know their stuff when they can cast a spell, not when they can diagram the correct incantation. Such alchemistswho have cast the textbook and its logocentric base out of the center, replacing it with a grand alchemy in which the real textbook emerges in the interaction between sorceror and apprentice, apprentice and apprentice. The exchange of power that occurs, the new appropriation of literacy, is neither arbitrary nor artificial.

Conclusion

Through this historical window on the functions of literacy, I believe we can say that our past is our future, and our future our past. We will soon enter a 21st Century that will be once again primarily oral but remarkably literate. We will have, perhaps, the best of both worlds: as in the preliterate past, in our postliterate future words will have flexibility, fluidity, spontaneity and unpredictability; but as in the old literacy, texts may still be stored and transmitted, fixed, made permanent, granted a place in the canon, and yet just as easily recalled, revised, reinterpreted, reintegrated into the life of the individual and the community.

I admit to some utopianism here, but to one no more farfetched than that my colleagues have made their creed. But a serious objection must be faced: if we dispense with books and

embrace the alchemy of word processing, by what entrance can the grand rhetorical tradition fostered by the original literacy come into this anti-logocentric classroom? It comes in person, manifesting itself in the sorceress as she shares experience, knowledge, facility with literacy. Just as the preliterate world stored its wisdom in the locals who had been around a while, so must composition instructors play the role of the crafty alchemist.

When literacy comes in person, through a human being, and not through the sterility of a book, one need not fear the depersonalization of the humanities or the demise of literacy itself. Understanding the past functions of literacy and how new technologies usurp their place frees us from the bondage of time and linearity, at once returning us to the past and helping us embrace the future.

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